

How to Read a Poem Out Loud

Poems are meant to be read out loud, the way songs are meant to be sung. It was common in the 1800s for people to get together and read poetry out loud to each other.

In order to read poetry well, you need to know a little about *prosody*. Prosody is the theory of rhyme and meter.

Poems can be broken down into 3 parts:

The stanza: a group of lines set off from the other lines in a poem. In traditional poems, the stanza usually contains a unit of thought, much like a paragraph.

The verse: a single line of poetry.

The foot: a syllable or a group of two or three syllables. Typically a foot will contain a stressed and an unstressed syllable.

To scan a line of poetry (that means to hear the rhythm) you count the number of feet in a line. For a beginner, the easiest thing to do is to count the number of stresses. This doesn't always work (some feet contain two stresses), but it will work often enough to give you the feel of the poem, which is all that we're after at this point.

In traditional, formal poetry there will be a regular pattern to the rhythm. Often, all the lines in a poem will contain the same number of feet. For example, in a sonnet, all the lines will have five feet. In many cases, though, a poet might alternate between lines with four feet and lines with three feet. In other cases, the patterns will be more complex. Unless you are reading free verse, there will be a pattern and you need to identify it.

For a more thorough discussion of prosody, check out [Tina Blue's web page "A Beginner's Guide to Prosody: Part 1"](#)

The Eleven Basic Steps to Preparing to Read a Poem

Step 1: Read through the poem (silently) to get a sense of it.

Step 2: Identify the sentences and independent clauses (circle the periods, exclamation points, question marks, and semicolons). For some reason, people always forget that *poetry is made up of complete sentences*.

Step 3: Read a few lines to figure out the meter (figure out how many stresses there are in a typical line).

Step 4: Note the rhyme scheme (look for a pattern).

Step 5: Read the poem out loud. Try to follow the rhythm. If you do this you'll hear where the poet plays with the rhythm, and you'll hear the rhyme scheme.

Step 6: Look up any words you don't understand. You can use an online dictionary so that you can hear how the words are pronounced, too.

Step 7: Re-read the poem out loud.

Step 8: Mark off any sections in the poem. These sections may be speeches given by a character, discussions of a particular topic, changes in mood, or a new stage of an argument.

Step 9: Re-read the poem.

Step 10: Figure out the tone -- the emotion -- of the poem.

Step 11: Re-read the poem.

So far you haven't done any analysis. But you've got a rich understanding of the poem. You know how it works as verse, and you've probably read the poem the way the poet meant it to be read.

Now you have prepared to read the poem well! When you get up in front of the class, there are some other things to remember, too.

When you go to read out loud in front of a group, remember:

- Read the poem slowly. Most teenagers speak rapidly, and a nervous reader will do the same in order to get the reading over with. Reading a poem slowly is the best way to ensure that the poem will be read clearly and understood by its listeners.
Learning to read a poem slowly will not just make the poem easier to hear; it will underscore the importance in poetry of each and every word. A poem cannot be read too slowly, and a good way for a reader to set an easy pace is to pause for a few seconds between the title and the poem's first line.
- Read in a normal, relaxed tone of voice. It is not necessary to give any of these poems a dramatic reading as if from a stage. The poems selected are mostly written in a natural, colloquial style and should be read that way. Let the words of the poem do the work. Just speak clearly and slowly.
- Obviously, poems come in lines, but pausing at the end of every line will create a choppy effect and interrupt the flow of the poem's sense. Readers should pause only where there is punctuation, just as you would when reading prose, only more slowly.
- Speak loudly enough to be heard without shouting (unless your poem needs you to shout!). If your audience can't hear you, they can't hear the poet's hard work—or yours!

More on **How to Read a Poem Out Loud**

from <http://www.latech.edu/tech/liberal-arts/english/old/owl/literature/poetryguide.htm>

or: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/615/01/>